

Message Text

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TAGS: PINT, U.K. (N.I.)

SUBJECT: HARRY WEST ELECTED UNIONIST PARTY LEADER

REF: BELFAST 8

SUMMARY: ULSTER UNIONIST ASSEMBLY PARTY LEADER HARRY WEST WAS ELECTED LEADER OF UNIONIST PARTY JAN 22 IN STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING. FAULKNERITES GENERALLY STAYED AWAY OR ABSTAINED. WEST OPPOSES NEW PAN-LOYALIST PARTY AND URGES PAISLEY AND CRAIG AND THEIR FOLLOWERS TO RETURN TO ORTHODOX UNIONIST FOLD. HIS PARTY OPPOSES CONSTITUTION ACT AND EXECUTIVE POWERSHARING WITH REPUBLICANS, BUT THROUGH CONSTITUTIONAL MEANS. EVENTS AT ASSEMBLY SITTING JANUARY 22 PUT SEVERE STRAIN ON HIS PARTY'S UNITY AND ITS COLLABORATION WITH LOYALIST COALITION. WEST'S RELATIVELY NON-DYNAMIC PERSONALITY AND PRESSURE OF EVENTS ARE LIKELY TO LEAD TO CONTINUED VARIETY OF STRATEGIES AND TACTICS ON PART OF ANTI-CONSTITUTION LOYALIST-UNIONISTS. END SUMMARY.

1. STANDING COMMITTEE OF ULSTER UNIONIST COUNCIL JANUARY 22

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ELECTED (UNPEDGED) ULSTER UNIONIST ASSEMBLY PARTY LEADER HARRY

WEST AS LEADER OF UNIONIST PARTY, REPLACING BRIAN FAULKNER WHO RESIGNED JANUARY 7.

2. ABOUT 170 OF STANDING COMMITTEE'S 270-ODD MEMBERS ATTENDED MOST FAULKNERITES ABSENTED SELVES FROM MEETING IN ORDER NOT TO APPEAR TO APPROVE CHANGE IN POLICIES AND LEADERSHIP, BUT LORD BROOKEBOROUGH AND SOME OTHERS WERE THERE SAS OBSERVERS. IT WAS UNOFFICIALLY REPORTED THAT WEST OBTAINED 85 VOTES TO 43 FOR HIS ONLY OPPONENT, SOUTH ANTRIM WESTMINSTER M.P. JAMES MOLYNEUX, WITH 12 SPOILED BALLOTS AND 28 ABSTENTIONS.

3. WEST IS WEALTHY 55-YEAR-OLD FARMER FROM COUNTY FERMANAGH. HE WAS TWICE MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE, FIRST IN MID-60'S UNTIL PRIME MINISTER O'NEILL SACKED HIM IN 1967 FOR VIOLATION OF CODE PROHIBITING CONFLICTS OF INTEREST BY CABINET MEMBERS AND AGAIN IN 1971-72 IN FAULKNER GOVERNMENT. BETWEEN THESE PERIODS IN OFFICE HE FORMED AND LED STRONGLY RIGHT-WING WEST ULSTER UNIONIST COUNCIL. WEST IS SAID TO BE LIKEABLE AND NOT PARTICULARLY AMBITIOUS PERSONALLY. HE REPORTEDLY DID NOT SEEK PARTY LEADERSHIP.

4. THERE HAS BEEN NO OVERWHELMINGLY OBVIOUS SUCCESSOR TO FAULKNER FROM AMONG PROMINENT UNIONISTS WHO OPPOSE CONSTITUTION ACT, POWER-SHARING EXECUTIVE, AND COUNCIL OF IRELAND. MOST CHARISMATIC OF UNPLEDGED UNIONIST ASSEMBLYMEN, JOHN TAYLOR, HAD REFUSED TO RUN BECAUSE HE WAS TOO YOUNG. LEADER OF WESTMINSTER UNIONIST PARTY, CPT. LAWRENCE ORR, AND ORANGE GRAND MASTER, REV. MARTIN SMYTH, ALSO DECLINED. THERE WAS TALK OF DIVIDING LEADERSHIP BETWEEN ASSEMBLY PARTY LEADER AND SOMEONE OUTSIDE ASSEMBLY AND THEREFORE SUPPOSEDLY IN CLOSER TOUCH WITH GRASS ROOTS. ULTIMATELY, IN JANUARY 21 VOTE, STANDING COMMITTEE REMAINED FAITHFUL TO UNIONIST TRADITION OF ACCEPTING AS LEADER THE CHOICE OF ITS STORMONT PARLIAMENTARY PARTY.

5. IN PRESS CONFERENCE AFTER HIS ELECTION, WEST DISCOURAGED TALK OF A NEW PAN-LOYALIST POLITICAL PARTY, AND URGED PAISLEY, CRAIG AND OTHERS WHO LEFT THE UNIONIST PARTY BECAUSE OF FAULKNER'S POLICIES TO RETURN TO THE PARTY NOW THAT IT HAS RETURNED TO ORTHODOXY. HE REITERATED REJECTION OF POWER-SHARING WITH REPUBLICANS ALTHOUGH HE WOULD NOT OBJECT TO FULL PARTICIPATION

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OF CATHOLICS IN GOVERNMENT OF NORTHERN IRELAND IF THEY WOULD ABANDON REPUBLICANISM. HE DOES NOT RECOGNIZE EXECUTIVE, AND HIS ASSEMBLY PARTY WILL REFUSE TO BE A "LOYAL OPPOSITION" BUT HE REJECTS THE USE OF PHYSICAL VIOLENCE FOR POLITICAL PURPOSES. HE WANTS RESTORATION OF PRE-1972 STORMONT.

6. WITHIN FEW SHORT HOURS OF HIS ELECTION WEST'S LEADERSHIP WAS TESTED BY RIOTOUS ASSEMBLY SITTING. HIS PARTY HAD PLEDGED

TO WAVE "DIGNIFIED PROTEST" AGAINST NEW EXECUTIVE, BUT NO DISRUPTION. IN THE EVENT WEST AND MOST OF HIS TEN FOLLOWERS WERE NOT THERE, BUT ONE REPORTER SAID AT LEAST ONE FORCIBLY RESISTED EXPULSION FROM CHAMBER BYRUC: JOHN LAIRD MADE TOKEN RESISTANCE: JOHN TAYLOR OBSERVED EVENTS FROM GOVERNMENT BACK BENCHES BUT TOOK NO PART IN THEM: WHILE, ON OTHER HAND, NOMINAL UNPLEDGED UNIONIST JAMES KILFEDDER (WHO HAS ALWAYS SAT DEEP IN OPPOSITION BACKBENCHES AND PLAYED LONE WOLF) EFFECTIVELY RECOGNIZED EXECUTIVE BY TABLING SEVERAL QUESTIONS TO SOME OF ITS MEMBERS.

7. COMMENT: A. WEST IS NOT NEARLY SO ARTICULATE OR SO AMBITIOUS AS HIS PREDECESSOR BRIAN FAULKNER, AND WILL NOT DOMINATE UNIONIST PARTY AS FAULKNER DID FOR NEARLY THREE YEARS. THERE WILL BE A DE FACTO COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP, WITH CONSIDERABLE VARIATIONS BY INDIVIDUAL UNIONISTS. B. WEST'S ORTHODOX UNIONISM AND DIFFERENT LOYALIST VIEWS ON TACTICS TO BE PURSUED IN OPPOSITION TO EXECUTIVE MAKE PAN-LOYALIST POLITICAL PARTY UNLIKELY IN FORESEEABLE FUTURE. C. ASSEMBLY SITTING POINTED UP DIVISIONS WITHIN WEST'S ULSTER UNIONIST ASSEMBLY PARTY AND BETWEEN CONSTITUTION STRATEGY AND TACTICS.
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